

have a plan at work—may have a lower cost or a reduced price for prescription drugs. Someone who is disabled and on Medicaid, for example, has the benefit of the Government bargaining to bring in lower prices. Right on down the line you see that person after person has protection, but for the senior citizens, they end up paying the highest prices.

I have heard colleagues repeatedly say, that is just the price you have to pay in America. We have to have somebody pay inflated prices for drugs so the companies have enough money for research.

Keep in mind that pharmaceutical companies are the most profitable economic sector of our economy. They make a lot of money. Though they need to make a profit—that is why they exist—though they need money for research, the fact is most of these companies pay more money for advertising their product than they do for research to find new cures for diseases.

We tried to pass a prescription drug bill that would have finally given Medicare the power to bargain down prices and make them affordable for seniors. It was rejected by the overwhelming majority of the other party and even a few on our side of the aisle because the pharmaceutical companies don't want to face any customer with bargaining power. Forty million seniors under Medicare would be the strongest bargaining unit possible. Instead, we passed a bill which, frankly, is going to delay the implementation of a very poor substitute, a Medicare drug program, until long after the election. Conveniently, this disastrous bill will not go into effect until long after the election. In the meantime, though, the Bush administration is anxious to tell the seniors that we haven't forgotten you.

Yesterday they rolled out a discount card to give seniors a break on the cost of drugs. Take a look at what that discount card means when we actually compared it to the town of Evanston, IL, to what people are paying at the pharmacy.

Lipitor, the largest selling drug in the world, \$10 billion in annual sales, \$6.5 billion in the United States, lowest retail price is \$68.99. With this great new discount card the Bush administration rolled out yesterday, \$67.07—a savings of 3 percent. Celebrex, savings of 2 percent. Norvasc, it turns out the discount card price is higher than the price of the pharmacy.

The bad part about this new Medicare drug discount card is, once a senior signs up for it, they are stuck for a year. That means they pay the annual fee and can't go to another private discount card. Meanwhile, the company offering the discount can change the number of drugs covered and the price of the drug on a weekly basis. So you are stuck having paid your membership fee with a situation where the drug companies can keep raising prices way beyond what you think they are going to be.

Are they likely to raise prices? Take a look at what has happened to the increases in prices since we started debating this: Celebrex has gone up 23 percent in cost; Coumadin, very common, 22 percent; Lipitor, 19 percent; Zoloft, 19 percent; Zyprexa, 16 percent; Prevacid, 15 percent; and Zocor, 15 percent.

So when you are saving 2 or 3 percent on the card today and no guarantee that it will be there tomorrow and prices are going up in this fashion, is it any wonder that seniors are skeptical of this administration's commitment to lowering drug prices?

Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson said last week: I want to roll seniors; on May 1 we are going to roll out this new card, but hold back. Don't commit yourself early. There is still more information coming in.

There certainly is. The information is troubling. These discount cards being offered by the Bush administration, frankly, could be a bait and switch for seniors. They could end up with a discount today that disappears tomorrow. They are stuck with it. They could end up signing for a discount card for a drug that is discontinued by that same company offering the card next week.

Take a look at what we could be doing instead of these bait-and-switch phony discount cards. Take a look at what we could be doing on Lipitor: With the Medicare discount card, \$67.07. Do you know how much they pay in a veterans hospital for that same drug? Thirty-six dollars and 48 cents. Why? Because the VA bargains with Pfizer and it brings the price down dramatically. This Senate passed a bill prohibiting us under Medicare from bargaining with pharmaceutical companies to get the best price for seniors. They specifically prohibited it. Why? So the drug companies could make more money and seniors would pay more money. If you have to go to Canada for that same Lipitor, it is about \$50. Look at this. America's seniors are paying the highest prices, even with the discount card, in comparison to veterans and the price of the same drug in Canada. Prevacid is \$111 under the Medicare card; it is \$53.90 in the VA hospitals; it is \$56 in Canada. Zocor is \$101 under the Medicare card; it is \$69 in a VA hospital; it is \$63.98 in Canada.

Seniors understand this. I met with them in Chicago yesterday. They understand what is happening here. This is an election year push to tell seniors across America they are going to get a discount. But they know better. They are wise in their years. They have seen a lot of politicians come and go. They are not going to be swayed by a discount card that offers little or no hope to bringing down the cost of these expensive drugs.

I have written a letter, along with a dozen colleagues, to Secretary Thompson, saying, For goodness sake, give seniors a grace period here. Don't tie

them down with a card that could be disastrous for them and their families. With a grace period, if they find out it is not a good deal, that would be fair to seniors—something the Medicare discount card is not.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ENZI). The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, under the time controlled by the Democrats, how much time does Senator LAUTENBERG have?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There are 9½ minutes.

Mr. REID. I checked with the majority. I ask unanimous consent for an additional 5 minutes on our side for Senator SCHUMER, and we ask also that there be 5 additional minutes of morning business extended to the majority.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from New Jersey is recognized.

MEDICARE DISCOUNT DRUG CARDS

Mr. LAUTENBERG. Mr. President, I want to now discuss my concerns about the ads we are seeing regarding the new Medicare drug discount card. I think the ads are misleading, and I am getting a lot of inquiries from people at home about is this good for me or not. I think there is a fundamental mistrust about whether this is an idea whose time ought not yet come, because the citizens are saying it is starting in 2006, and this is obviously a lead-in to that. I think it can be described as a placeholder.

The card became available yesterday, but the administration is keeping seniors in the dark about the real benefits and weaknesses of the program. They have produced a television commercial that is hyping the card and are spending \$18 billion to show it across the country.

In this ad, there is a group of seniors in line at a pharmacy and the announcer says: "Good news for those with Medicare. You can get savings on prescriptions." They do it in the right mellifluous tone, just for those on Medicare. That is really all the announcer says about the card—"good news . . . you can get savings." That's it—all hype and no substance.

The television ad is almost a cruel joke on our Nation's seniors. Instead of providing real, needed information about the drug card, the administration has launched a PR campaign to boost the image of the card.